

# Dynamite



**THE DARK  
CRYSTAL**  
**An All-New  
Muppet  
Creature  
Feature**

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# THE DARK CRYSTAL

## An All-New Muppet Creature Feature

Frank Oz has a close encounter with Kira, a Gelfling who also escaped the evil Skeksis.

For Jim Henson, the man behind the *Muppets*, *The Dark Crystal* is a dream come true. Five years ago, the creatures in this new fantasy adventure movie were just ideas in his head. Since then, Jim, his fellow Muppeteer, Frank Oz, and as many as 400 skilled crew members have spent years working to bring his ideas to life and to the movie screen. During the filming of the movie, few reporters were allowed on the set. However, Dynamite's Chip Lovitt was invited to spend several days in the London studio where the movie was being made. When he returned home, Chip reported in *Dynamite* a little bit of what he had seen, but he saved the best of the inside info for this very special report. Now here's the whole story of Chip's trip to the world of *The Dark Crystal*.

### It's a Weird World

If it weren't for all the lights, cameras, and crew in the studio, a visitor on *The Dark Crystal* set could easily imagine he

was actually "in another world, in another time," the setting for the movie. Everywhere I looked were strange landscapes and even stranger looking creatures.

*The Dark Crystal* tells the story one of those creatures, Jen, the last of an elflike race of creatures called Gelflings. Jen must find a powerful, glowing stone called the Dark Crystal and return it to its rightful place or else evil will triumph over all things good and wholesome. Jen travels through strange and hostile landscapes, and he encounters friendly creatures, such as Pod People and Fizgigs, and evil ones, such as the scheming Skeksis and fierce, armor-covered warriors called Garthim.

*The Dark Crystal* is different from most movies because it doesn't feature any human actors. The stars are all life-size puppets created especially for the movie. The puppets are actually worn by the puppeteers. Many are equipped with mechanisms that allow their ears, eyes, mouths, and other facial features to

move. While Jim Henson told me, "There's no way we can get as expressive as the human face," the puppets' facial movements made them look alive. One character, the Chamberlain, can make as many as 21 different facial expressions.

"The puppets' faces are all mechanically operated or radio controlled," Gary Kurtz told me. Kurtz, whose credits include *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back*, is serving as co-producer with Jim. "In most cases, their facial movements are cable run with a direct wire, which has a hand control at the end. Usually, there are four operators for each creature."

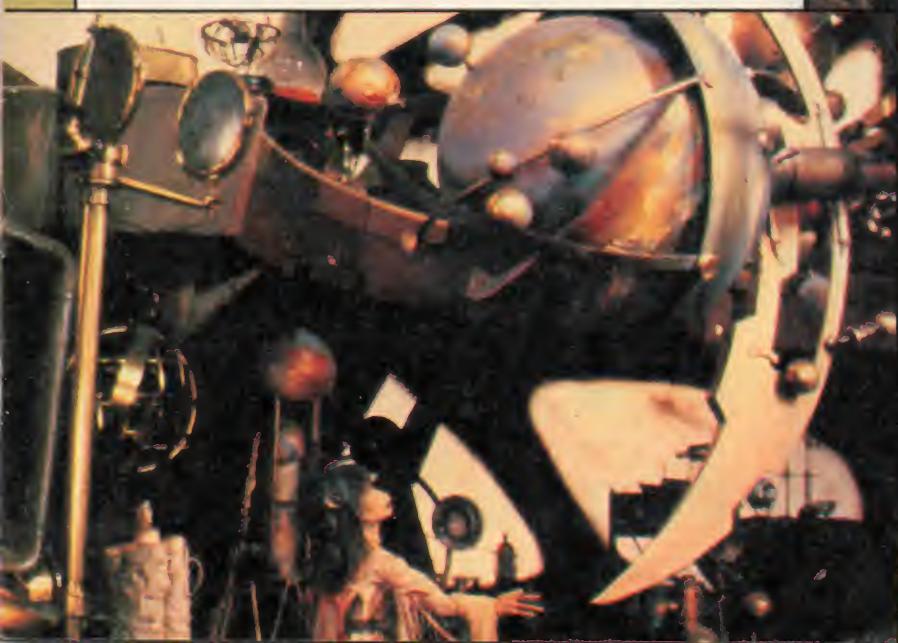
Jim and Frank are each handling several puppets, in addition to directing others. Jim handles Jen, while Frank handles several other creatures including Aughra, a strange-looking sorceress. Since these puppets, not actors, are the stars, the sets had to be built high off the ground. Panels of each stage could be removed so the puppeteers could stand on platforms below and raise the puppets up through those holes to stage level. The cameras were mounted on runways around the edge of stage and only the puppet appeared in camera range. Despite the specially designed sets, han-

Jen marvels at the spinning globes in Aughra's observatory. The puppeteers had to duck each time the blade swung over their heads.

dling the puppets was hard work. I got a firsthand look at just how difficult it was as Frank put the 30-pound Aughra puppet on over his head and adjusted the special harness that held it in place.

The scene was Aughra's observatory. In the center was a large telescopelike object with dozens of brightly colored globes spinning in different directions and two long arms that swung in a large arc across the set. While the crew checked their equipment and camera angles, lighting, and sound, Frank waited patiently, still wearing the heavy Aughra puppet. Each scene had to be rehearsed carefully and every move plotted. To make matters more difficult, as Frank moved, a team of four crew members crouched behind him out of camera range and worked the cables that made Aughra's face move.

One of the ur-Ru, a clan of strange, but friendly mystics, who saved Jen from the clutching claws of the Garthim warriors.



Jim explained that the production called for a special video system to be used along with regular film cameras. "It's a video system that goes through the camera lens so we see exactly what's going on film. There's no other way we could do this kind of movie."

### The Wizardry of Oz

Since Frank wouldn't be able to see anything while wearing the puppet, he had a small video screen built inside the costume so he could see where he was going. That didn't solve all his problems.

"It's also a real physical workout just to manipulate the puppet and keep it upright," Frank said during a brief break. "And while you're doing that, you have to concentrate on other things such as what the puppet's face is focused on and what its expression is. On top of that, you've also got lines to say."

Frank returned to the stage and filming began again. Every few minutes, one of the long arms of the telescope swung dangerously close to the top of Aughra's head. "Duck," the crew yelled at Frank each time, and he did. It took four takes to get the scene right. In the next scene, Aughra was shown walking around the observatory. So Frank got a break as Mike Osborn, a midget, put on an Aughra costume. By the time he finished,

**Aughra, an astronomer and Keeper of Secrets, helps Jen on his quest for the Dark Crystal.**



C. ITC Entertainment Ltd. 1981

he was soaked with perspiration. "Get an air conditioner in there next time," he joked.

### The Art of Moviemaking

I visited several other *Dark Crystal* sets, including realistic-looking caves, forests full of strange plants, and a banquet hall with a table buried under rotten-looking fake food. The art department had the responsibility for designing the scenery, which was based on drawings done by a famous fantasy artist named Brian Froud.

But as Gary Kurtz pointed out, "Doing something live in three dimensions is quite different than a drawing on paper. That's where production designer Harry Lange and the art department come in." Lange is quite capable of creating out-of-this-world scenes. In addition to working on movies such as *Star Wars* and *Superman*, he also worked as an illustrator for the space agency NASA.

The special effects crew also faced some challenging situations that ranged from the simple to the spectacular. "Because there isn't a single live actor in this movie, you have a lot of problems you wouldn't ordinarily have. Whatever is going to be picked up or handled by a character has to be made in such a way that it can be picked up by one of the creatures, not a human being. That makes things more complicated," Ian Wingrove, special effects supervisor, told me.

The telescope in Aughra's observatory is one of the more spectacular effects. It was so complicated that an outside engineering firm was called in to help design and build it. "It's got three motors driving it and three more motors to operate the globes that revolve. The total construction time was three months, and we were working with an eight-person crew," Ian recalled.

"This is one of those films," he continued, "that has a lot of effects, but most of them are hidden in engineering, such as rocks coming out of castle floors and

walls. But there's really no such thing as an easy special effect. There have been a lot of small things that were harder to do than the more spectacular-looking effects. For example, one small but complicated effect was a rock that had to split in three pieces when it was struck by a sword. The rock was pre-cut into three pieces and we had this paste to hold it together. When it was hit, it flew apart. We also had to add some explosives that produced flashes of light when the rock was struck.

"Another difficult effect we did," Ian went on, "was a Garthim collapsing. A Garthim is a creature with nothing inside. It's just a shell. That was tricky because we had to hide any mechanics so the audience wouldn't see them. It took four days to rig and four more days to film. It will probably only appear on camera for a minute."

### Eight Bad Guys Rolled Into One

In another area of the studio, Gary Kurtz was busy supervising the shooting of one of the most impressive scenes of the movie. "This is for the climax when these creatures, called Mystics and Skeksis, come together in the crystal

chamber in a sort of ritual. Eight of the creatures meld together to form another creature," Kurtz explained.

A puppeteer put on one of the Mystics' costumes and was filmed on video and with a movie camera as he slowly crouched down to look as if he were shrinking. When that was done, another puppeteer stepped onto the set. Kurtz looked at his video monitor to check the location and movements of the first puppeteer. Then he directed the second to stand in the right place so his body would match up with the first. By the end of the scene's two-day filming schedule, Kurtz had finished shooting eight of the creatures this way. Each time he checked the video screen, combining the previously filmed images with each new puppeteer. Eventually, Kurtz said, the scene would combine as many as 12 different pieces of film. Like previous scenes, the finished result would only last a minute on screen.

While special effects are important, Frank Oz pointed out during lunch the next day, "The puppets really are the special effects. We're counting on these creatures and their costumes to carry the picture."

"Puppetry isn't really the best word to use," Jim Henson added. "What we are trying to do is bring these characters to life and tell a story. The special effects are only meant to help create the world they live in. It's the creatures and the way they live that I find fascinating and hope audiences will, too."

"The *Dark Crystal* is a very special project for Jim," Gary Kurtz told me. "It's something he's been dreaming about for years." Frank Oz has also been dreaming about this day, too. A year ago, when the movie was just about halfway done, Frank made a wish after a long morning of shooting and directing. "Sometimes," he said, "we'd just like to stop, get some popcorn, and see it." Finally his wish can come true.

—Chip Lovitt

The evil Skeksis.

